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Spring 2019

### Reintegration of Women Perpetrators in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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# Reintegration of Women Perpetrators in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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Spring 2019

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**List of Abbreviations**

NURC.....National Unity and Reconciliation Commission

RPF.....Rwandan Patriotic Front

### **Abstract**

Women tend to be victims during times of violence. Due to this the breadth of research on women who perpetrate violence is limited. Due to stereotypes women are more often than not seen as peace makers and nurturers, which ignores the fact that women have just as much capability as men to inflict violence. During the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, average citizens, including women, became perpetrators of genocide. As this genocide only occurred in 1994 research on the reintegration of perpetrators is limited. This paper asks the question how are women perpetrators of Genocide being reintegrated into society? Further, how does the community's perception of women perpetrators influence reintegration?

This study relies on ethnography and interviews. Prior to formally beginning research I spent three months in Rwanda observing the culture and studying the Genocide and peacebuilding process. I interviewed survivors and perpetrators to get their perspectives on reintegration. I also interviewed a member of a government organization to better understand how the Rwandan government is promoting on reintegration. Further research should be done on this topic in following years, as reintegration progresses.

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## **Background of Study**

During conflict the role of women is generally of victim rather than perpetrator. However, during times of conflict there are always women who participate in violence. Women participants of violence are very under-researched, and the reintegration of women perpetrators is even more under researched. Due to this issue little is understood about individual women who perpetrate acts of violence during times of conflict. In Rwanda, it is known that average citizens, including women, participated in the Genocide against Tutsi (Jessee 2015). Most of the narratives around women perpetrators in Rwanda focus on women who played supporting roles with little mention of women who actively committed physical violence (African Rights 1995). In order for sustainable peace to be achieved in Rwanda, the role of all types of perpetrators must be understood and accounted for. On a macroscale, it is important to understand how women perpetrators of violence are perceived because doing so will help us to understand the gender dynamics of the aftermath of violence and disrupt stereotypes that women are passive and incapable of perpetrating violence, thus creating a more gender equal world.

## **Research Question**

How are women perpetrators being reintegrated into Rwanda? How does the community's perception of women perpetrators influence reintegration?

## **Study Objectives**

1. Understand how women are perceived for the crimes they committed during the Genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda.

2. Assess the reintegration process of female perpetrators of genocide after serving their sentence.

### **Brief Background of the Genocide against the Tutsi**

The Genocide against Tutsi has roots in colonialism. Rwanda was colonized between the years of 1897-1962, originally by Germany and then by Belgium. Prior to colonial rule the identities of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa were predominantly based on social class and occupation, not ethnicity. However, under a divide and rule policy Belgium introduced identity cards in 1931 (NURC 2016). Belgium arbitrarily decided that Tutsi were more suited for positions of power and gave them positions in the government as well as greater access to education and land. Hutu people were consistently discriminated against under colonial rule. However, in 1959 when the Hutu majority began to make demands of sovereignty, Belgium switched sides and began supporting a Hutu uprising which resulted in the killing and displacement of Tutsis (Sperling 2006).

The 1959 Hutu uprising placed the Hutu majority in political power. The Hutu government discriminated against Tutsi's, denying them access to political power and education (Sperling 2006). Juvenal Habyarimana became the second president of Rwanda in 1973, as a part of the MRND party. The MRND government continued to discriminate against Tutsi. As tensions began to build between the MRND and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi rebel force formed in Uganda in an attempt to take back political control, the international community arranged a peace agreement. The peace agreement, entitled the Arusha Accords, was signed on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993 and was supposed to give the RPF a share of political and military power.



However, the peace agreement fell apart on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1994 when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down (Sperling).

The Genocide against Tutsi began almost immediately following the assassination of Habyarimana. Between April and July of 1994, approximately one million Tutsi were killed. The expert execution of the Genocide is indicative of the fact that Hutu extremists had been planning the Genocide for years. Propagandist media was successful in preaching messages that demonized Tutsi's and mobilized average citizens during the Genocide. After months of extreme violence, the Genocide was stopped by RPF invasion in Kigali (Sperling 2006). Immediately after the Genocide the new government began prosecuting perpetrators on an international and local level. Lower level perpetrators of the Genocide were prosecuted by the Gacaca courts, a traditional form of justice. Gacaca would prove to be instrumental for the future of the country because it encouraged perpetrators to tell the truth and apologize to their victims, allowing for the possibility of reconciliation.

### **Women in Pre-genocide Rwanda**

Every modern society has a long history of entrenched patriarchy that disenfranchises women and people who deviate from gender norms. In traditional Rwandan society, gender roles were strictly divided. Women were in charge of managing the household and children while men were taught to defend the interests of the nation and were in charge of all major decisions. These divisions in labor and social life were instilled in Rwandan children from a young age. While obedience is a core value of Rwandan society, girls were taught to be particularly obedient to their parents and authority (Hogg 2010). Rwandan women were meant to be respectful, submissive and uninvolved in political life. Women, whose status was elevated through “modest behavior marriage, and raising well-mannered children”, were subject to ostracization if they did not comply to gender norms. Women who were outspoken were deemed *igishagabo*, or “big men-women” (Jessee 2015). The usage of this insult shows the ostracization that women who diverged from prescribed gender norms faced. Further, gender inequality in areas of literacy and wealth also plagued Rwanda, making it all the more difficult for women to exercise agency (Hogg 2010).

That being said, there were some women that diverged from the norm. According to Hogg, 22% of rural Rwandan household were headed by women prior to the genocide (2010).

This figure complicates the image of a woman completely at the mercy of her husband. Hogg also suggests that because part of women's role in the household was adviser to their husband, they may have had more power within the home than originally perceived (2010). Prior to colonialism women also exercised power within the family. Queen Mothers, who ruled alongside their sons, wielded a great deal of power over Kings and society as a whole (Hogg 2010). That being said, it should be noted that even with the consideration of the advisory position, women's power mostly operated within the home. Still, there are always exceptions. By 1992 twelve out of seventy government ministers were women. In 1993 Agathe Uwilingiyima became the Prime Minister of Rwanda and served until she was assassinated during the Genocide. Uwilingiyimana, often referred to as 'the rebel', is a powerful female figure in Rwandan history who consistently opposed President Habyariman's extremist agenda and fought for the rights of women and girls (Hogg 2010).

The way women in Rwanda were perceived prior to the genocide is contingent on the roles they were prescribed to. Women were perceived as peacemakers and life-bringers, making women's participation in violence almost unimaginable (Hogg 2010). This perception of women is unremarkable and not unique to Rwanda, as even today women are consistently seen as more peaceful than men. Though there were some women in the military prior to the genocide, it was rare, likely because of the perception of women as peacemakers (Hogg 2010). A woman committing an act of violence was seen as one of the greatest taboos in Rwandan society (Jessee 2015). Women are not necessarily more naturally more peaceful than men but are socialized to be so and ostracized if they do not conform. This is in line with constructivist theories about the socialization of gendered attitudes towards war and peace or violence and nonviolence (Brouneus 2016). Sara E. Brown supports this idea when she suggests that while gender

identities *may* have biological grounds, gender stereotypes are more often than not a result of gendered assumptions about “a woman’s status in society and perceived gender roles” (Brown 2014).

It is important to analyze women’s role in Rwandan society pre-genocide because these roles inform how women acted during and after the Genocide. If we are to understand gender-discrepancies in participation during the Genocide, we must understand how men and women were socialized to react to violence. Furthermore, it stands to reason that gender roles would persist post-genocide and would impact reconstruction and reconciliation. Thus, it is important to understand reconstruction through a gendered lens in order to build sustainable peace.

### **Women’s role in the Genocide**

The ways in which the majority of women participated in the Genocide against the Tutsi is undoubtedly different than the way that most men participated. For the most part, women acted in supportive rather than active roles during the Genocide. Smeulers describes women as being “cheerleaders” to their male counterparts (2015). For instance, many women brought meals and water to male perpetrators during the genocide. The vast majority of women who are considered to be perpetrators of genocide were either those who exposed or took advantage of victims. Women often referred to as “traitors” exposed hiding places of victims or gave away information that would ultimately lead to their deaths (Smeulers 2015). The use of the word “traitor” in this context is noteworthy because it implies an assumed alliance between women and victims, that is not there for men. Women are seen as traitors against their nature for participating in violence. Smeulers writes about how teachers would hand over students to killer groups (2015). Similarly, Brown notes that women participated indirectly by exposing and looting (2014). Despite the fact that women tended to commit objectively lesser crimes than

men, according to Erin Jessee, they were often subject to harsher prison sentences (2015). This is in part due to the fact that women were seen as nurturers and that committing violence was such a taboo for women. These perceptions probably led women to be judged and sentenced much more harshly than men.

### *Motivations*

Many people who participated in the genocide, regardless of gender, were motivated by fear. A study done by Smeulders and Hoex suggests that many people were threatened with death or beatings if they did not participate (2010). However, it seems that fear as a driving factor was even more elevated among women. Because a woman's role was subservient to her husband's wishes, it stands to reason that she would be afraid to go against her husband's wishes. Women interviewed by Hogg stated that they were most often forced by the Interahamwe to expose where Tutsi were hiding. Though not all of these women experienced direct threats, they still feared the consequences they would face if they did not cooperate (Hogg 2015).

Though gender roles were stark in pre-genocide Rwanda, ethnic identity often overrode one's gender identity. The Habyarimana regime made it a point to destabilize the bond between women in Rwanda by using gender targeted messages (Brown 2014). The Hutu Ten commandments, one of the most influential documents in the mobilization toward genocide, had several gender specific points. Tutsi women were accused of acting only in the interest of their group and were not to be trusted. Hutu women were said to be more "suitable and conscientious" in their roles as women. Hutu women were specifically called upon to "be vigilant" and bring their "husbands, brothers, and sons back to reason". In so many ways, Hutu women were pushed to see Tutsi women as their enemies (Brown 2014). This shows that though fear may have been a contributing factor to why many women participated in the Genocide, it could not be true to say

that none were motivated by hatred or Hutu loyalty. This distinction is an important one to make because it influences how we perceive women in the genocide against the Tutsi. If we acknowledge that some women were motivated by hatred, we also acknowledge that women are capable of violence and can fill other roles than victim in conflict.

### **High profile female perpetrators**

#### *Pauline Nyiramashuko*

Pauline Nyiramashuko is the only woman to have been convicted before the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda (ICTR), and the only woman to have been convicted by an international criminal court for genocide and sexual violence. Nyiriamasuhuko was charged with genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, complicity in genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, murder, extermination, persecution, inhumane acts, and outrages on personal dignity (Hogg 2010). Prior to and during the genocide Nyiramashuko was the Minister of Family and Women's affairs and a high-ranking member of Habyarimana's inner circle (Brown). Nyiramashuko was involved in the planning and implementation of the Genocide. When Habyarimana's plane crashed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, Pauline was called on to serve in the interim government and was sent to Butare to see that the genocide was carried out (Sperling 2006). Perhaps the most striking of Nyiramashuko's crimes considering her gender is her encouragement of the rape of Tutsi women. Nyiramashuko was even accused of ordering her own son to rape Tutsi women (Smeulers 2015).

It is unclear whether Nyiriamasuhuko crimes were motivated by hatred or political gain. Nyiriamasuhuko, born in Butare, was known to be politically ambitious from a young age, taking advantage of her friendship with President Habyarimana's wife, Agathe (Smeulers 2015). By twenty-two, she was the national inspector of ministry (Sperling 2006) At age 40 she began to

study law and later became a local politician, before moving in to her role as minister. Scholars such as Smeulers have speculated that Nyiramasuhuko's actions might have been politically motivated, and that she might have been manipulating a polarized society to attain a more powerful position. On the other hand, some have suggested that Nyiramasuhuko's great grandfather was Tutsi, and that her extremism might have been in an attempt to hide her true identity (Smeulers 2015).

Those who knew Nyiramasuhuko stated that she loved her party and was extreme (Hogg). Further, Maxwell Nkole, an ICTR investigator stated that Nyiramasuhuko was convinced by propaganda that propagated a myth about "beautiful arrogant Tutsi" women, that "led to jealousy" from Hutu women (Hogg 2010). The language in this statement should be noted for its gendered content. Jealousy, for instance, has the connotation of being a very female emotion. In addition, this statement can be seen as trivializing Nyiramasuhuko's role as boiling down to jealousy, something that no man would be accused of. Whatever her motivations, Nyiramasuhuko committed extreme violence and atrocities during genocide.

Nyiramasuhuko's defense before the ICTR, as well as the public's perception of her crimes were heavily influenced by her gender. Sperling remarks on how the press at the time of the trial was more fixated on Nyiramasuhuko's gender and appearance, than her crimes. The media referred to Nyiramasuhuko as a "frenzied madwoman" and constantly commented on her appearance (Sperling 2006).

Nyiramasuhuko pled not guilty to the crimes she was accused of, stating that she had no real power in the government, that she was new to politics and that as a woman it would be impossible for her to commit violence (Hogg 2010). Nyiramasuhuko accused the ICTR and the RPF of being sexist, suggesting that she was targeted specifically because she was an educated

woman (Sperling). Nyiramasuhuko's husband supported her throughout the trial, claiming that she was committed to promoting gender equality (Sperling 2006). However, Nyiramasuhuko's gender, along with her role as a minister and mother, made her crimes even more despicable to the public. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2011 Nyiramasuhuko was found guilty on seven of the eleven charges she was accused of. She was convicted of genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Along with her son, Nyiramasuhuko was sentenced to life in prison (Smeulers 2015).

#### *Sister Gertrude and Sister Kisito*

Sister Gertrude and Sister Kisito were two other infamous women involved in the Genocide against the Tutsi. Sister Gertrude was the Mother Superior of the Covenant in the Sovu Monastery in Butare (Hogg 2010). The nuns chased Tutsi out of their monastery and handed them over to the Interahamwe. They also bought petrol that was used to set fire to a garage which was housing six hundred Tutsi (Smeulers 2015). Sister Gertrude was accused of refusing to feed 3,500 refugees in the Sovu Health Centre, before bringing soldiers to force them to leave the monastery. Sister Kisito was nicknamed "animal" by survivors. Both nuns were convicted in 2001 in Belgium of international and attempted homicide. Sister Gertrude was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and Sister Kisito was sentenced to twelve (Hogg 2010).

The sisters gender as well as their positions as women of God influenced the way that they were perceived for their crimes. The prosecutor during the trial called the nuns monsters and vultures, comparing Sister Gertrude to Eichmann. The defense rested heavily on the suggestion that the nuns could not have behaved any differently. The sisters suggested they acted out of fear and naivety (Hogg 2010). The nuns were able to use this defense because of their gender. Perceptions of women in conflict as victims and the assumption that women are inherently more



peaceful than men, allowed the nuns to use this argument as a defense. For those that did not believe this defense, the nuns' gender also caused them to be much more harshly demonized than men who perpetrated similar or more violent crimes.

#### *Anne-Marie Nyirahakizimana*

Anne-Marie Nyirahakizimana was one of few women who wielded power in the Rwandan military. Nyirahakizimana stood trial before the Kigali Military Court in 1999 and was convicted of genocide. According to witnesses, soon after the assassination of Habyarimana, Nyirahakizimana came across a group of Interahamwe who were cooking beef and encouraged them to begin killing Tutsi and then take their property. The Court found that this incident and Nyirahakizimana was the cause of the massacres that occurred in the Gikondo Commune (Hogg 2010).

Nyirahakizimana also relied on her gender as a part of her defense. She pled not guilty and portrayed herself as powerless. Nyirahakizimana admitted to encountering the Interahamwe on that day, but stated that they accused her of being RPF, and that this had scared her into compliance. Further, she portrayed herself as a savior, calling witnesses to testify that she had in fact saved them during the Genocide (Hogg 2010). This defense would not have been used if Nyirahakizimana was not a woman. Again, gender stereotypes that portray women as powerless allowed her to make this defense. Women, particularly in pre-genocide Rwanda, were seen as life givers and caregivers, which is what Nyirahakizimana tried to lean into as her defense.

#### *Agathe Kanziga*

Agathe Kanizga, the widow of President Habyarimana played a role in constructing the genocide. She was a part of the Akuzza, the inner circle of the extremist regime, and participated in the planning (Smeulers 2015). Kanziga was often referred to as "Kanjogera", who was an

infamous and violent Queen Mother in pre-colonial Rwanda. Kanziga was instrumental in the creation of extremist media, particularly radio RTLM and the newspaper Kangura. After her husband's death she created a list of politicians to be executed, particularly targeting other women in positions of power that stood against the extremism of her party (Hogg). After the assassination of her husband, she fled Rwanda but continued to provide funding to extremist media within the country (Smeulers 2015).

Kanziga was arrested in France and pled not guilty. She stated that her role of First Lady was mostly symbolic and that she did not have any political influence. She focused her defense on the fact that she was a mother and that her time was spent caring for her children rather involving herself in her husband's agenda. According to Hogg, Kanziga portrayed an image of herself that was that of a "simple woman" and a mother who was "ignorant of political affairs". Above all, she portrayed herself as a traditional Rwandan woman, incapable of violence. However, witnesses against Kanziga painted a very different picture of her role, and she was ultimately convicted of the crime of genocide (Hogg 2010).

### **Policy of National Unity**

The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) was established in Rwanda in 1999, with the main goal of achieving a united country post-genocide. Some of the functions of the NURC are to create programs that promote national unity, educate the population about national unity, carry out research, and disseminate ideas and publications promoting peace (NURC). The NURC was responsible for implementing gacaca, the traditional restorative justice court system that was used after the Genocide for low level perpetrators. Umuganda was revived by NURC and is a community service program that happens on the last Saturday of every month, which is supposed to promote unity through service. The NURC and policy of national unity and

reconciliation are important in the context of this research because this policy is supposed to encourage the reintegration of former perpetrators.

### *Restorative justice and reintegration*

Restorative or transitional justice is an important concept to examine when looking at how Rwanda has been able to heal post genocide. According to Zehr, often referred to as the father of restorative justice, restorative justice expands the circle of those involved in the justice process from just the offender and the government, to include victims and community members (Zehr 2014). Restorative justice aims to be as inclusive as possible and put right the harms done by crimes. By this definition, the gacaca process in Rwanda should be considered a restorative justice practice. One of the main principles of restorative justice is the reintegration of both the victim and the offender into society (Zehr 2014). Because the participation in the Genocide against the Tutsi was so vast, involving so many community members it would have been impossible for the Rwandan government to give every perpetrator a life sentence, meaning that many perpetrators.

Returning home after one's sentence is completed means that social reintegration is essential in creating sustainable peace. Researchers from NURC discuss social reintegration as "fundamentally an ethical question related to both material and immaterial dimensions of dealing with the aftermath of a crime" (2015). This idea is in line with Zehr's theory of restorative justice that crimes create wounds that require fulfillment. NURC researchers define social reintegration as the "reentry of an individual or group of people into their community of origin regardless of their status of offender or not", meaning that social reintegration is contingent on the way the community member perceives the offender and how they decide to act based on these perceptions (2015). Moreover, NURC contends that perceptions of the community are associated

with perpetrators being able to “take their full responsibility for ‘making things right for the victims’”, which is also a similar understand to Zehr’s (2015).

Recently studies have been conducted on the mental health status of victims of the genocide, showing that the majority experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Though data on the mental health of perpetrators of genocide is scarce, some studies have shown high levels of “psychiatric morbidity” among imprisoned people (Schall, Heim, Elbert 2014). It should go without saying that witnessing violence, whether as a perpetrator or victim, has an effect on one’s psyche. A study from Schall et al., suggests that appetitive aggression, or being drawn to or fascinated by violence, might be a shielding factor from developing PTSD. Further, it was found that men are more likely to develop appetitive aggression and thus less likely to develop PTSD (Schall et. al 2014). Broneus also suggests that women in post-genocide Rwanda tend to experience higher levels of PTSD. If women are less likely to develop appetitive aggression and more likely to develop PTSD, it would stand to reason that women who participated in the genocide would have higher levels of mental distress, making reintegration more difficult. Further, because violence is more stigmatized for women, it may be that women face more judgement for their crimes, causing more mental distress.

### *Reintegration programs*

Convicted perpetrators of the Genocide benefit from a multitude of different programs that are supposed to assist with reintegration. A study done by the NURC found that 65% participated in reconciliation sessions, 62% in therapy and 48% in commemoration events (2015). Reconciliation session could work to sensitize the receiving community and victims to the perpetrator’s presence, as well as give perpetrators an opportunity to take responsibility for their crimes. Therapy and counseling could allow perpetrators to begin to heal their own traumas

associated with the crimes they committed. Participating in commemoration events not only allows perpetrators to recognize the harm they created but can show victims that offenders take responsibility for their crimes. The study also found that 89% of perpetrators had visits from family while in prison. This is important because it has been shown that familial and social support can be pivotal in reintegration efforts (2015).

### **Women in Contemporary Rwanda**

It is often suggested that women are more peaceful than men. In international relations and diplomacy, the women and peace hypothesis suggests that having more women in positions of power creates a more peaceful society (Brouneus 2014). It is important to point out that though this theory has been empirically supported, the more peaceful nature of women is likely do to socialization rather than biology. As described above, women in Rwanda were socialized against violence and toward nurturing. Today, Rwanda has the highest number of women in the national legislature. Post-genocide the ruling party, the RPF, has taken many steps to increase women's participation in government, including the creation of the Ministry of Gender, with the goal of creating a more peaceful and equitable society (Burnet 2008). The promotion of gender equality by the current government is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. Women in Rwanda today are exercising much more agency over their own lives and claiming more political power in the government.

### **Methodology**

Prior to gathering my primary data, I conducted a literature review of scholarly sources on related topics. The data gathering of this study will involve a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is best suited for this type of research because it involves people's feelings and perceptions of violence committed by women and how their perceptions might affect

reintegration. I base my understanding of qualitative research off of the description given by Cooper and Finley, who describe qualitative research as focusing “on people and phenomena in their natural setting” (2014). My primary method of data gathering will be semi standardized interviews, as I will need the freedom to digress because I will be talking about people’s lived experiences (Berg 2007). In addition, my research includes a nontraditional form of ethnography. Wolcott describes ethnography as “deeply hanging out”. Welty elaborates on this understanding by describing ethnography using participant observation and interviews to understand how “systems of meaning are created by individuals...or larger groups” (2014). The form of ethnography I apply in this case is based on Erin Jessee’s research, in which I will be critically reflecting on what I have gathered by fully immersing myself in Rwandan culture for three months.

Reflexivity is also very important in the context of this research. This is particularly important in the field of peace research because it attempts to generate work that will contribute to a more peaceful society. A peace researcher must reflect on their own positionality in the world because it influences not only the way that data is gathered but how well they understand the population they are working with. In my case, I am a foreigner studying a country that has been through something that is in many ways unimaginable to me. It is important for me to be aware of this and cautious in working with a traumatized population. Further, my positionality may elicit certain answers to questions that might be different if I were myself Rwandan.

I am taking a dramaturgical approach to interviewing. Dramaturgical interviewing is active and two sided. It is seen as a “meaning making occasion”, where the interviewer is allowed to show their own feelings during the interview (Berg 2007). I decided to take this approach because my research question is about people’s perceptions, so I need to take a more

human and conversational approach. For my study I interviewed three perpetrators of genocide, two of which were women and four survivors of mixed genders. I chose these people because they are a part of a cooperative that is working to contribute to the reconciliation process. The ethical considerations for my interviewees include the fact that they are a part of a traumatized population. However, during interviews I did not ask about personal experience or traumatic events that they themselves experienced. Further, this is a group that voluntarily tells their stories to people in an attempt to stop genocide ideology and contribute to peace in Rwanda. I have changed all names associated with cooperative members.

The limitations of this study include time, language and culture. This research will be conducted over the course of one month. If given more time, a larger sample of interviewees would be useful. As previously mentioned, not being Rwandan may be a limitation in my conversations with people because of my positionality. In addition, as I am not fluent in Kinyarwanda and have had to work through a translator. Moreover, Rwandan culture tends to not be very critical, so it can sometimes be difficult to get accurate information.

### **Ethnography**

Prior to beginning my interviews, I spent two months in Rwanda studying post-genocide reconstruction and attempting to fully immerse myself in the culture. During these two months I attended lectures on Rwandan culture and history as well as peacebuilding and reconstruction. Something about Rwandan culture that I observed time and time again was a great respect for authority. This idea was something that came up quite a bit in a class on the micro dynamics of genocide. Typically, when people discuss the Genocide and the aftermath, the government is

blamed. The word “leadership” is used as a synonym for government. Though leadership is rarely defined, it is often used as a synonym for the ruling party. Many Rwandans rely heavily on the influence of “bad leadership” as an explanation for the Genocide and attribute the current state of stability to the “good leadership” of the RPF. Respect for authority is so embedded in the social fabric of Rwanda that people rarely criticize the government and engage in a lot of self-censorship.

The large degree of self-censorship makes it difficult to get a realistic picture of post-genocide Rwanda. I observed that no Rwandan would publicly discuss any short comings of the policy of unity and reconciliation, much less outright criticize it. For example, everyday Rwandans that I spoke to, would definitively proclaim the rhetoric of “one Rwanda”. Yet, upon further question were distrustful of opposing groups. For instance, several young people told me they would never bring a Hutu into their homes, much less marry them. This example is indicative of how NURC policy is influencing collective consciousness in Rwanda but has not yet bridged the rift in people’s private lives.

The large degree of self-censorship is important to this research because it influenced the degree of honesty and depth of answers that I was able to receive during my interviews. During lectures and interviews when I asked about the status of women in contemporary Rwanda, answers usually relied on the high number of women in government as proof that gender equality has been achieved in Rwanda. Though undoubtedly this is a great accomplishment and should be praised, it does not necessarily mean that men and women are perfectly equal. Based on my observation’s women continue to fall into the roles of homemaker and mother above all else, suggesting that the gender imbalance may be more than everyday Rwandans are willing to admit.

**Ukuri Kuganze Cooperative**



I began formally collecting my data by conducting interviews with members of the Ukuri Kuganze Cooperative. Ukuri Kuganze, which translates to “let truth prevail”, was created by Didas Kayinamura in 2003. Kayinamura is a former perpetrator who established the cooperative with the objectives of contributing to unity and reconciliation, fighting against genocide ideology, working toward development and good governance and building respect, trust, honesty, and mutual support (Peace Insight). According to my conversations with members, the cooperative is made of perpetrators that are still incarcerated, those who have been recently released and survivors. I conducted seven interviews with a combination of former perpetrators and survivors, a mixture of men and women.

#### *Women in Pre-Genocide Rwanda*

I began my interviews by asking members to talk to me about what the role of women in Rwanda prior to the genocide. Members discussed with me how women’s role in society was centered around the home. Several interviewees said that women had “no rights”, in pre-genocide Rwanda. Women were not allowed to participate in government and did not have “free speech”. These personal experiences align with both Jessee and Hogg’s and analyses of women in Rwanda prior to the genocide. On the other hand, some interviewees, stressed that women were in complete control over the home. One former woman perpetrator spoke to me about how she enjoyed her life in Rwanda prior to the Genocide. She talked to me about how she had a good relationship with her neighbors and a central role in her family. A, Allain, survivor told me that prior to the genocide women were seen as “trustworthy” and were known for exhibiting pity and forgiveness. These views of women in pre-genocide Rwanda are in line with Hogg’s findings that while many women were subjugated, others expressed agency over their lives and the lives of their families.

### *Women's participation during the Genocide*

The role of women in pre-genocide Rwanda influenced how women participated during the genocide. A survivor, Emmanuel, stated that propaganda in Rwanda had equal influence over men and women. He referred to participation during the Genocide as a matter of the heart. This perception suggests an understanding of the Genocide based on individual choice, which differs from the common understanding that blames bad governance. Further, Emmanuel's analysis lacks a gender difference in participants. Emmanuel and other members suggested that the reason, so few women participated in direct violence was because of their traditional roles in the home. This would suggest that women had just as strong motivations as men did to participate in the Genocide but participated in different ways because of culture and socialization. Similarly, Emmanuel also stated that propaganda by the MRND worked just as well on women as it did on men, supporting the idea that some women were just as capable and willing to commit direct violence against the Tutsi

Other members of the cooperative suggested that women participated in the Genocide because of the influence of their husbands or because they were threatened. A female perpetrator began her story by telling me about how she was threatened by the Interahamwe and forced to kill a man. She described how shocked she was when the Interahamwe instructed her to kill, stating "how can I kill a man when I am a woman?". Jean Baptiste told me a story of women beating babies with wooden grinders, traditionally used to grind cassava, and how shocking it was to see someone he perceived to be a mother committing such acts. Based on the feedback I received during these interviews, it can be concluded that it was much more shocking to witness women committing violence during the Genocide. Because women were seen as life bringers,

nurturers and caregivers, people were shocked to see them acting as informants but even more shocked to see them killing people.

### *Reintegration*

I concluded my interviews by speaking with cooperative members about the reintegration of perpetrators into post-genocide society. During this part of the interview I began by asking generally how interviewees saw perpetrators reintegrating into society. Most, if not all, interviewees referenced the effort by the government to create national unity, suggesting that communities were adequately prepared to wholeheartedly receive released perpetrators. When I asked interviewees if they thought that women perpetrators were seen differently than men, most answered no and brought up how *gacaca* produced sentences regardless of gender. Emmanuel stated “during *gacaca* everyone was accused according to performance during genocide...for women (sentencing) was less according to their performance”, meaning that women perpetrated lesser crimes and were given lesser sentences.

However, when I asked interviewees if they thought that it was harder for women to reintegrate into society all definitively stated yes. Though these questions were virtually the same, it should be noted that they resulted in two completely different answers from participants. This could be in part due to a language barrier. It could also be due to the way Rwandans view authority and unity and reconciliation efforts from the government. Rwandans rarely criticize the government and the first question I asked seemed to elicit reactions to national unity and reconciliation rather than personal lived experiences.

There were several impediments to reintegration that were specific to women. Interviewees brought up how because so few women committed direct violence during the Genocide, for a woman who had killed returning home meant that everyone would know about

the crimes she committed. This is different from men because of the large number of male participants causes their crimes to be less novel. In other words, male participants stand out less. Sarah, a survivor who was very young during the Genocide, talked to me about how she observed that perpetrators continue to be afraid. Sarah suggested that perpetrators are uncomfortable and too scared to reintegrate into society. This is exasperated for women because they are more stigmatized for committing these crimes.

Reintegrating into the family also seems to be more difficult for women. All of the women perpetrators I interviewed discussed having been rejected by their children at one point in time. A woman perpetrator, Nicole, told me about how when she was released from TIG, her children initially rejected her until a survivor's family helped her to mend her relationship with them. Nicole told me that she left her children at home with her husband while she served her sentence. Upon return she felt a great shame to be a woman returning from TIG. She said that she had to be "very careful" for a long time, monitoring her every move so as not to upset her children and raise any suspicions about her character. Allain observed how some women returned home to find their husbands remarried. For him, this was the main barrier for women returning home because their entire lives and livelihoods had shifted. None of the male perpetrators I interviewed discussed their children or how their families viewed them. This is indicative of how prevalent traditional gender roles continue to be and how they can make it more difficult for women to reintegrate into society.

## **Itorero**

The National Itorero Commission was established by law in 2013. The vision of the commission is to create a “population with a value system that promotes voluntary service to the nation with the aim of promoting unity” (NIC website). The mandate of the commission includes training Rwandans on shared “values and taboos in their coexistence”, to be patriotic, to understand national programs, and to promote volunteerism through national service. (NIC website). The core values include unity, patriotism, selflessness, integrity, responsibility, volunteerism and humility. Itorero is comprised of a council of commissioners, a chairperson and a vice chairperson, who serve terms of five years and can be elected twice. Members of the council are appointed by Presidential Order and approved by the senate.

*Edouard Bamporiki*

The current chairperson of Itorero is Edouard Bamporiki, whom I had the opportunity to interview. I spoke with Bamporiki about Itorero’s role in promoting reconciliation, particularly in the context of their mandate which is supposed to educate Rwandans about national policies. I asked Bamporiki how Itorero is promoting reconciliation in Rwanda and he said

“We have this value of uniting Rwandan, we teach it in Itorero. It’s a value we had so many years ago, but if you look back to the colonial period...this value of unity was just politics, it wasn’t a reality. Today, we are trying to see how people can be united...it is becoming the culture of Rwandans. People are united in the public sector and the private sector...in every life we want people to be united in whatever they do.”

Based on what I have observed in Rwanda it seems as if the work of organization like Itorero are working in that it is becoming the culture of Rwandans to view themselves as one group, particularly among younger generations. However, this goal is not yet fully realized. When I asked about how reconciliation relates to the reintegration of perpetrators, he said

“If there is no reconciliation, it is not going to be easy to reintegrate. They’re being reintegrated because we decided to accept reconciliation.”

Further, Bamporiki discussed with me how there are programs in place that prepare perpetrators for coming back into the community while they are in prison, including a system that brings perpetrators to victims so that they can ask for forgiveness.

Though the policy of unity and reconciliation is gender-neutral, Bamporiki discussed with me some of the unique challenges that women face when reintegrating into their communities. Bamporiki echoed what members of the cooperative had said, stating

“women in Rwanda, based on the history of our country, they were not supposed to be killed and they were not supposed to be perpetrators”,

because of traditional gender roles. These traditional gender roles not only made it more shocking to see women perpetrating violence, but also had a more severe effect on the women themselves. Bamporiki discussed with me how women perpetrators tended to feel more guilt and shame because of their crimes, describing them as feeling lost. Using the word “lost” here is accurate because women who perpetrated crimes during the Genocide seem to have lost their identities as women. This loss of identity could be a barrier to reintegration because women who have perpetrated violence no longer know where they fit into society.

Women tend to have a harder time reintegrating into their families after they are released. Similar to the testimonies given by the members of the Ukuri Kuganze Cooperative, Bamporiki told me that one of the biggest challenges for women coming home from prison is finding that their husbands have remarried. Though women whose husbands are go to prison tend to wait for their release, men tend to remarry, leaving many women to fend for themselves for the first time. Not only does the lack of livelihood pose a barrier to reintegration, but because women tend to be the center of family life, coming home to no family represents a loss of identity, which can be quite painful. Bamporiki himself stated

“I told my wife, if I happened to sleep with another woman, you will have to forgive me. I told her if you do the same, I will not be able to forgive you. This is not fair, but this is what happens in the culture.”

This quote is striking because it is indicative of a continued gender imbalance in private Rwandan life. Despite policies of gender equality, it is clear that differences still persist and doubtlessly pose threats to reintegration.

### **My Son It Is a Long Story**

Besides being the chairperson of Itorero, Edouard Bamporiki is also the author of *My Son, It Is a Long Story: Reflections of Genocide Perpetrators*. This book consists of transcribed interviews that Bamporiki conducted with perpetrators of the Genocide. The way Bamporiki titled the chapters of this book are indicative of how women perpetrators are seen differently than men. There is a chapter titled “Women Genocidaires”, is notably separate from the chapter on “Adult Genocidaires”, which consists of testimonies from men. This is noteworthy because the chapter on adults is the default category and made up completely of male perpetrators. This is in line with feminist theories that suggest that men are seen as the default identity, and women are presented in opposition to the default.

Bamporiki’s analysis of his interviews with women was starkly different than those he conducted with men. He begins his chapter on women preparators by noting that many interviews were cut short because the interviewees were “too emotional”. Further he states

“...when a woman turns to evil, she does so completely...If she turns her back to motherhood, she may die without ever reclaiming that revered status. To be evil is to be non-existent, for her wickedness cancels out any natural protective instinct for those being murdered, failing in the duty entrusted to her. There is no bigger abomination in the Rwandan tradition” (96).

This quote alone should illustrate how much more stigmatized women perpetrators of the Genocide are than men. In many ways, he is saying that there is no coming back for women who have committed such atrocities. Men however, do not bear the same burden as being seen as

having turned their backs on nature. This pervasive perception of women without a doubt influences how they are seen when they return to their communities.

## **Conclusions**

The historical and traditional gender roles place women as submissive to men. Women's traditional roles include being mothers and homemakers. Though these roles are changing, the majority of women continue to follow traditional gender to some extent. The historical context of women in Rwanda made it difficult for women to make their own decisions during the Genocide. That being said, there are notable women who exercised agency during the Genocide, including Pauline Nyiramasuko and Anne-Marie Nyirahakizimana. Most women who participated in the Genocide against Tutsi acted in supporting roles to the men who were committing physical violence. Because so few women participated in direct violence, those who did are much more highly stigmatized. A Rwandan woman is traditional seen as a life bringer, so to see a woman taking a life is incredibly shocking and upsetting.

Though the current government in Rwanda has made great efforts to unite Rwandans, making it easier for former perpetrators to return, it is clear that the work is not yet done. The continued suspicion of opposing ethnic groups that I observed in private life makes true reconciliation difficult. Moreover, though all perpetrators face challenges returning home, overall it can be concluded that women perpetrators face unique challenges in reintegrating into Rwandan society. Interviewees spoke to me about how women who return to their villages continued to be known as perpetrators, while men are able to assume different identities. In addition, women who return from prison often come home to find that their husbands have



remarried. This effects not only their ability to meet their basic survival needs, but can also create and identity crisis, considering the primary identity of a woman is within the home.

Rwanda is currently making great strides toward gender equality. The country currently has the highest number of women in government in the world. However, more work needs to be done in the private sector to destabilize taken for granted gender roles. The fact that women's violence is more stigmatized than men's goes to show that women's nature is assumed to be more peaceful than that of men. This is an example of benevolent sexism that in some ways is more insidious than other forms of sexism because it is less obvious. Assumptions like this about women's nature puts all gender identities in a box and contributes to a continued oppression of women.

The findings of this study are important because they contribute to what is understood about post-genocide Rwanda. Women who commit violence are highly under researched. Women perpetrators of the Genocide against the Tutsi are even less researched considering how recent the Genocide was. The unique nature of this Genocide is that so many average citizens participated, meaning that it is impossible for every perpetrator to spend the rest of their lives in prison. The unique challenges that women perpetrators face need to be understood in order for true reconciliation and sustainable peace to be achieved.

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